5 POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND INTERACTION IN SOUTHERN BELIZE

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Inland Toledo District, Belize, is rich in Classic period archaeological sites. Among the most important Maya centers and cities are Pusilhá, Uxbenka, Lubaantun, and Nim Li Punit. What has not been certain is whether these sites formed distinct political or economic units. A particular problem in answering this question has been chronology. Until recently, it has not been clear if these sites were all contemporary, and if so, when they were occupied. Recent archaeological and epigraphic research at Pusilhá and Uxbenka demonstrate that these sites were at least partially contemporary with Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun. All four sites were occupied during the 8th century A.D., that is, during the second half of the Late Classic period. Our paper reviews the chronology of inland Toledo District and concludes that these four sites formed distinct polities.

Introduction

One of the enduring questions of Maya archaeology concerns the political and economic relationships of the Classic Maya. Specifically, archaeologists and epigraphers have long argued about integration and political structure at the regional level. Views on the existence of regional Maya states have not approached a steady equilibrium but have tended to swing like a pendulum between competing polar opposites.

In the late 19th century, Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) argued that the Maya had no state-level organization and lived at the level of "lower barbarism." Reacting strongly against this view, Sylvanus Morley (1920) proposed that the Maya were organized as two temporally distinct "empires," dominated during the Classic period by Tikal and in the Early Postclassic by Chichen Itza. Somewhat later, J. Eric S. Thompson (1954) depicted the Maya as living in small city states, like the ancient Greeks. Thompson and many followers, however, strongly argued that Maya sites - even the largest ones - were not cities at all but were empty ceremonial centers. This view of the mid 20th-century, that the Maya had city states without urban cities, was inconsistent with any anthropologically known example of state or empire, and represented a return of a sort to Morgan's position. But settlement studies conducted in the late 1950s through 1970s at Dzibilchaltun, Tikal, Seibal, and Quirigua all demonstrated without a doubt that the Classic Maya had cities, urban society, and therefore some form of state-level political organization (Ashmore 2007; Puleston 1983; Stuart et al. 1979; Tourtellot 1988).

Spurred on by Heinrich Berlin's (1958) discovery of the significance of emblem glyphs, epigraphers of the 1970s through 1990s engaged in vigorous debates concerning the size and nature of Maya states. Joyce Marcus (1976) used a distributional approach to emblem glyphs and was the first to propose the existence of competing regional states. The larger of these regional states - centered at cities like Tikal, Calakmul, Copan, and Palenque — encompassed secondary polities or provinces (with their own emblem glyphs), tertiary centers (without emblem glyphs), and fourth-level sites (lacking hieroglyphic texts). Richard E.W. Adams and Richard Jones (1981) used complementary architectural data, particularly counts of plaza groups, to create a model of regional states somewhat like Marcus' formulations.

But pendulums move most rapidly when in the middle of their swing, and these intermediate notions of regional states were quickly challenged by epigraphers. Peter Mathews (1991) argued that any site—no matter how small — that had an emblem glyph and was governed by an *ajaw*, was the capital of an independent polity. The 1980s and early 1990s, therefore, saw appeals to various political models that argued for some form of segmentary political structure (e.g., Ball and Taschek 1991; Demarest 1992; Laporte 1996; Ringle and Bey 1992). More recently, the work of Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube (1995) returned Maya political studies to a position between Marcus and Morley. Although there never was a unified

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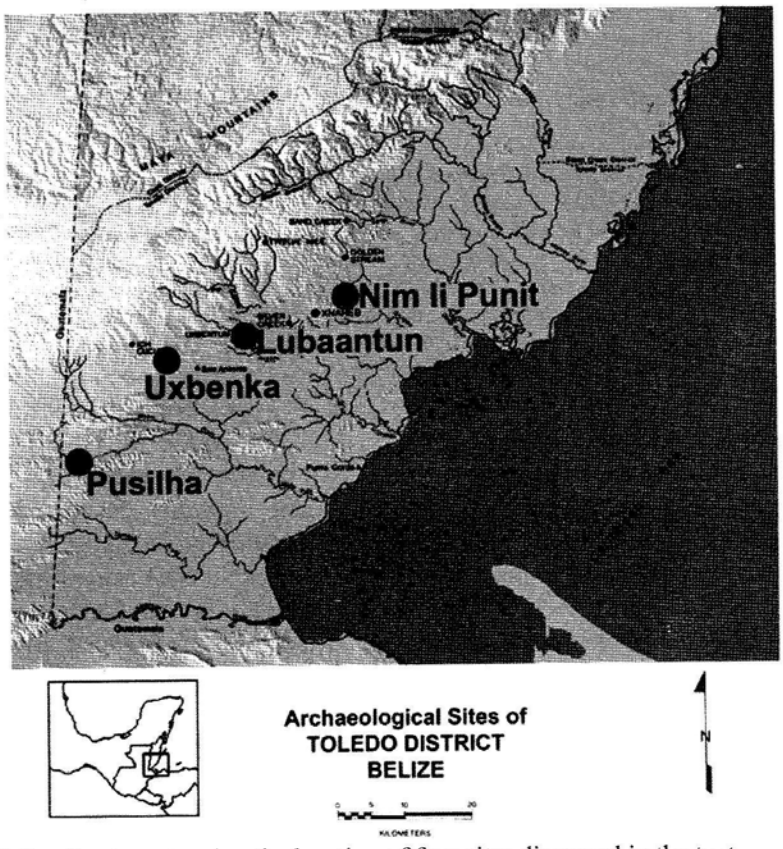

Figure 1. The Southern Belize Region, showing the location of four sites discussed in the text.

Maya "empire," Martin and Grube argue that much of Classic Maya political history can be understood in terms of a centuries-long conflict between two large "super states" centered at Tikal and Calakmul. To them, smaller polities were hegemonically bound through alliances to either of these two states. Both larger and smaller Maya cities had *ajawob*, but some *ajawob* were much more equal than others.

Many scholars now suggest that Maya political organization differed greatly over time and space. There probably were as many kinds of Maya polities as there were polities. The problem in evaluating competing models regarding political organization above the level of the individual polity — even if we consider just one particular time and one specific zone within the Maya area—is that scholars seldom have comparative archaeological data on the regional level. Without comparative data from different sites in the same region, it is difficult to test competing models of political and economic integration. If, as archaeologists, we are going to understand the political and economic organization of the Classic Maya above the level of the particular site or small polity, we will need to conduct more regional and comparative projects.

Southern Belize Region

One laboratory ideally suited for such a regional study is the "Southern Belize Region," defined by Richard Leventhal (Figure 1). The Southern Belize Region encompasses the foothill sites of Lubaantun, Pusilhá, Nim Li Punit, and Uxbenka within a rather small geographical area bounded by the rugged Maya Mountains to the north and west, and by the agriculturally limited coastal plains and swamps to the south and east. Another group of smaller and less well-known sites is located in the Maya Mountains, specifically in the Bladen Branch River and upper Columbia and Rio Grande drainages (Prufer 2005). Maya mountain sites, such as Muklebal Tzul and Ek Xux, are discussed only in passing in this paper.

Although there are strong ceramic similarities, it is not yet clear how these sites interacted with the large centers in the foothills.

The sites in the Southern Belize Region all share certain architectural and hieroglyphic traits (Leventhal 1990, 1992). First, vaulted architecture is absent and masonry superstructural walls are uncommon. Second, many large structures are integrated into natural topography. Free-standing pyramids are rare, but modified hills with facades are common. In the Maya Mountains, about half the public architecture was built on modified hills, and about half consists of free-standing platforms built in the alluvial valleys. Third, many of the ballcourts in the Southern Belize Region are enclosed by walls. Fourth, and quite unlike most of Belize with the exception of Caracol, hieroglyphic monuments are very common. Finally, as noted by Thompson (1928) and Morley (1938), the lunar series
content of the southern Belize monuments is often erroneous or, better said, inconsistent with that recorded in other areas.

The sites of the Southern Belize Region, therefore, share much in common. But were they ever unified politically into a single regional state? If so, when? Did they participate in a unified economic system? Did their inhabitants all share a common identity and speak a single language? We will not lead you on and pretend that we have any sure answers. But our two archaeological projects, currently based at Pusilha and Uxbenka, are working on these questions.

Southern Belize Chronology

The first step towards analyzing the relationships between the major sites of the Southern Belize Region is to understand their relative chronologies. Clearly, if the sites were occupied during different periods, then they could not have interacted politically. Put another way, without detailed chronological data, we cannot say which of these four sites existed at any given time, let alone which or how many were political capitals in the region.

Further complicating matters is that there are different sorts of chronological data for each of the major Southern Belize sites. Before the beginnings of our current projects at Pusilhá and Uxbenka, Lubaantun was the only site in the region with a detailed ceramic chronology (Hammond 1975). Although Lubaantun has three ballcourt markers, they lack absolute hieroglyphic dates. Unless new monuments are found at Lubaantun, we will never know much about its dynastic history. Before 2001, all that was known about the chronology of Pusilhá was derived from the hieroglyphic monuments discussed by Thomas Gann (in Joyce et al. 1928) and Morley (1938). No one had studied the ceramics of Pusilhá in considerable depth, although Hammond (1975) and Leventhal (n.d.) did examine materials from Pottery Cave and other parts of the site, and dated them to the Late Classic. Uxbenka has many monuments described by Leventhal (1990, 1992) and most recently by Wanyerka (2003). Unfortunately, only three (including one discovered in 2005) have readable hieroglyphic dates. Neither ceramic studies nor radiometric assays were carried out until the current project. Finally, Nim Li Punit has many hieroglyphic monuments dating to a very narrow time frame (Hammond et al. 1999; Leventhal 1992; MacLeod n.d.), but the ceramics of that site have not been analyzed in detail. It is possible that the occupation of Nim Li Punit was much longer than is implied by the royal texts. Finally, radiocarbon dates and preliminary analyses of ceramics from several Maya Mountain sites reveal that occupation was heaviest during the Late to Terminal Classic, and that at least one center, Ek Xux, was occupied in the Early Classic (Prufer 2005). In short, until quite recently, what we knew about the chronology of the major sites of the Southern Belize Region was drawn from different sorts of data, and hence could not easily be compared.

Despite the general lack of chronological precision, Norman Hammond (1975), Leventhal (1990), and others and others recognized two broad periods of occupation in the Southern Belize Region. Uxbenka and Pusilha were both thought to be earlier sites, dating to the Early Classic and Late Classic periods. In contrast, Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun were viewed as dating to the end of the Late Classic and into the Terminal Classic period. It was not at all clear if Uxbenka and Pusilhá overlapped in time with Nim Li Punit or

Lubaantun. In fact, until the discovery of new monuments at Pusilhá, there seemed to be at least a four year gap between the end of hieroglyphic writing at Pusilhá and the beginning of monument erection at Nim Li Punit.

Hammond (1981), Leventhal (1990, n.d.), and Dunham et al. (1989) all have proposed that Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun were contemporary sites. Hammond (1981) argues that they functioned together as one capital. For him, Nim Li Punit was the dynastic focus of the region (with kingly monuments) while Lubaantun was the administrative center. The division of sacred and secular space was important to the Classic Maya, but the distance between Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun makes it difficult to view them as parts of the same site.

Here we will look at each of the four major sites in the Southern Belize Region. We will give special focus to Uxbenka and Pusilhá, the two sites where we have been working, but we will also summarize some of what is known about Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun, specifically in regard to chronology. Finally - and very tentatively - we will consider potential models for the political and economic organization of the Southern Belize Region from its initial occupation, which we now date to the 1st century A.D., until its near abandonment sometime in the Postclassic period.

Uxbenka

Uxbenka is located at the western end of a line of rolling foothills below the limestone eastern flank of the southern Maya Mountains (Figure 1), but distinctly separated from the interior of the mountains by lines of craggy karst. This same line of foothills is also home to Lubaantun, Nim Li Punit, Xnaheb, and a host of smaller sites, making it the most densely populated pre-Columbian landform in southern Belize. The underlying geology of the foothills is sedimentary, and produces calcareous and noncalcareous soils; the former of notable fertility. These soils derive primarily from decaying silt and mudstones, rapidly weathering sedimentary rocks dominated by silt-and-clay-sized particles. This contrasts strongly with Pusilhá and the Maya Mountains sites which occupy different landforms with different soils. Around Pusilhá landforms are mostly limestone, with alluvial soils along the Machaca and Poite Rivers giving way to thinner limestone soils in the uplands. In the interior of the Maya Mountains, soils are derived from limestone and volcanic rocks eroding along the eastern flank of the central mountain divide.

Uxbenka is located in what is today an exceptionally rich agricultural region with easy access to coastal and inland trade routes. These trade routes probably existed in the past, as well. Although impermanent human presence in the region extends back further, we consider Uxbenka to have been the first settled community and the oldest known of the ancient Maya sites in southern Belize, with roots dating back to the Terminal Preclassic period (Prufer et al. 2008). The earliest radiocarbon date we have for the site has its midpoint just before A.D. 100. Excavations suggest that Uxbenka began as a small farming village. About 200 years later, that is, during the Early Classic Period, it emerged as a regional center. Although the rise of Uxbenka was followed by the development of a number of other regional political centers sometime after A.D. 570, current data suggest that it may have been the only significant site in the Southern Belize Region for more than 250 years.

Carved stone monuments from Uxbenka tell us about both the development and complexity of the region and connections with larger polities outside of southern Belize. Epigraphic and iconographic analyses suggest that the majority of these monuments date to the Late Classic period, but several have been stylistically dated to the Early Classic and one, the recently discovered Stela 23, contains an Early Classic Initial Series date. Stela 15, the latest dated monument, was erected in A.D. 780. All of the known monuments are found are found in Group A, suggesting continuity over a period of at least four centuries.

Monuments from Uxbenka suggest a political relationship between southern Belize and Tikal during the latter part of the Early Classic, slightly before A.D. 400, and possible dynastic connections between the rulers of Uxbenka and a ruling dynasty of Tikal. Uxbenka Stela 11, a nearly complete monument, has been dated stylistically to within one *k'atun*

of 8.18.0.0.0 (A.D. 396). It portrays and names *Chak Tok' Ich'aak* I, who ruled Tikal until A.D. 378, and also mentions his grandmother, Lady *Une' B'ahlam* (Prufer et al. 2006; Wanyerka 2003). Unfortunately, this intriguing reference does not tell us the exact nature of the relationship between Tikal and Uxbenka. Did Tikal install a ruler of Uxbenka during the life of *Chak Tok' Ich'aak* I? Did elements of this dynasty arrive in southern Belize after their ouster from Tikal? Or was Uxbenka merely emulating a powerful neighbor? At present, we can conclude only two things. First, that there was some sort of dynastic link between Uxbenka and Tikal. Second, because Uxbenka was settled long before Stela 11 was erected, the stela does not demonstrate that Tikal "founded" the site in the 4th century A.D.

In 2005 we recovered the oldest monument with a long count date known for southern Belize. Stela 23 is a fragment of an Early Classic monument that records an Initial Series date of 9.1.0.0.0 6 *Ajaw* 13 *Yaxk'in* (25 August, A.D. 455). The text begins with a representation of an Early Classic *ajaw* glyph. Recorded at A1 is the *Tzolk'in* day name 6 *Ajaw*. Immediately following the *Tzolk'in* is a truncated Lunar or Supplemental Series featuring the Lord of the Night. In this case G9 appears to have been recorded since the main sign appears to feature a half-darkened *k'in* sign. The text continues at A2 with an unusual form of what is likely Glyph D. According to Nikolai Grube, this example may be a "New Moon" reference being described in an unusual collocation suggesting that the moon entered the *che'en* or cave.

During the Late Classic period, Uxbenka grew significantly, indicating either rapid population growth, migration to the region, or both. We are currently investigating major construction at the site dating to this period. The decline of the site is poorly understood, but likely coincided with the rapid abandonment of most political centers in the region. There is little evidence of any Postclassic occupation of the site, but tantalizing evidence is emerging of Late Postclassic and historical use of the region as a farming community. Historic accounts suggest there may have been people living in the area at the time of the Spanish Conquest and colonization.

Pusilhá

Pusilhá is by far the largest ancient Maya city in southern Belize. It is also the second oldest permanently settled site known in the Southern Belize Region, founded about A.D. 570 by *K'awil Chan K'inich*, whom Christian Prager has nick-named Ruler A. During the ensuing 228 years, or until A.D. 798, the rulers of Pusilhá erected at least 21stelae, four zoomorphic altars, three carved ballcourt markers, the only known hieroglyphic stair in Belize, and 18 miscellaneous carved monuments (Braswell 2007a, 2007b; Braswell and Prager 2003; Braswell et al. 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Maguire et al. 2003; Prager 2002). With the exception of the zoomorphic altars, which have their closest comparisons at nearby Quirigua, the figural sides of the Pusilhá monuments are all rendered in a clearly Peten style. Despite this, possible political and economic connections between Pusilhá and both Copan and Quirigua have long been posited. In fact, our project began with the goal of understanding the relationship between Pusilhá and Copan. Nonetheless, as we have reported at this conference for several years, we now see only the most tenuous of evidence for such connections. *K'ak' U Ti' Chan*, the second ruler of Pusilhá, shares the same name as Ruler 11 of Copan and was at least partially contemporary with that ruler. But careful analyses of the inscriptions conducted by Prager (2002) reveal that the Pusilhá king lived at least 20 years after his counterpart at Copan died, and that he was the first born son of none other than Pusilhá Ruler A. The two lords of Copan and Pusilhá shared a name, and perhaps even the king of Pusilhá was named after his more powerful counterpart. But we can deduce little more than this. By the middle of the 7th century, there is no other hieroglyphic evidence of connections between Pusilhá and either Copan or Quirigua.

Cassandra Bill's ceramic analyses also found only the most tenuous of ties between Pusilhá and the Copan/Quirigua region (Bill and Braswell 2005; Bill et al. 2005; Braswell et al. 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008). Moreover, those connections seem to have been limited to the

early 7th century. Instead, the vast majority of the pottery recovered from Pusilhá can be assigned to types best known from the Peten. Pusilhá is a Tepeu-sphere site, and ceramic ties are especially close to sites in the Pasion, Petexbatun, and Cancuen regions. For this reason, we speculate that the inhabitants of Pusilha may have come originally from the southwestern Peten.

One of the most curious ceramic discoveries is that *comales* or griddles are common at Pusilhá (Bill and Braswell 2005; Braswell et al. 2008). This suggests that the inhabitants of the site made and ate tortillas. Comales are well known in the Maya highlands and parts of the southern lowlands, including the southwestern Peten and the Dolores Valley. But they are unknown or quite rare in the central Peten, and western and northern Belize. They are also missing from the inventory at both Uxbenka and Lubaantun (see Hammond 1975), suggesting that within the Southern Belize Region, the populations of different sites maintained different foodways. Identity is often closely linked with food, so it is quite likely that the Classic period inhabitants of Toledo District, just like the modern ones, had distinct identities.

Grinding stones from Pusilhá were made of a number of local and imported materials. Most interestingly, most of the imported *manos* and *metates* were made of late Tertiary and Quaternary volcanics from the eastern Guatemalan highlands (Braswell et al. 2008). Not one groundstone artifact made of much older volcanic materials from the Maya Mountains was recovered. This implies that the inhabitants of Pusilhá did not engage in much trade with the small yet relatively nearby sites in the Maya Mountains, and that we might need to reconsider the temporal placement, economic importance, or regional affiliation of the latter.

The latest monument at Pusilhá is the hieroglyphic stair found in Moho Plaza, whose calendar round date and style suggests a date of A.D. 798 (Braswell et al. 2005a, 2005b). Occupation of Pusilhá continued for sometime after the cessation of monument carving (Braswell 2007a; Braswell et al. 2005b). Much of the surface debris in the Gateway Hill Acropolis and other important groups dates to the Terminal Classic period. Two important burials that we discovered in the acropolis date to sometime after about A.D. 830 and contain copies of Pabellon Model Carved vessels (Braswell and Gibbs 2006; Braswell et al. 2008). We have also found limited quantities of exotic Mexican obsidian which were imported to the Maya region principally during the 10th century (Braswell et al. 2008). Finally, at the platform we call the Bulldozed Mound, we recovered pottery dating to the Postclassic period (Bill and Braswell 2005; Bill et al. 2005; Braswell et al. 2005b). When we began work at Pusilha in 2001, the only evidence for the end of occupation was the latest monument known to Morley (1938), which was dedicated in A.D. 731. We now know from hieroglyphic texts and ceramics that dynastic rule continued until at least the end of the 8th century, and that permanent occupation continued, perhaps sporadically, until the Postclassic.

Nim Li Punit

We know much less about Nim Li Punit than we do about the other three major sites of the Southern Belize Region. After its discovery in the 1970s, the site was mapped and many monuments were drawn (e.g., Hammond et al. 1999; MacLeod n.d.). Leventhal (1990, 1992) conducted salvage excavations of a royal tomb at the site, as did members of the more recent MASDP development project. Most of what we know about the chronology of the site is derived from its hieroglyphic monuments, and general appraisals that it has both Late and Terminal Classic ceramics. In this regard, Nim Li Punit is like Uxbenka and Pusilhá before the beginnings of our two projects.

There are 21 known stelae at Nim Li Punit (Hammond et al. 1999; Mexicon 1998; Wanyerka 2003). Stela 15 is the oldest of these monuments. It begins with what is probably a retrospective Initial Series date of A.D. 721. The monument itself seems to have been carved no earlier than A.D. 734, because an additional calendar round date probably refers to a day in that year (see Wanyerka 2003:62). The latest monument at Nim Li Punit with an Initial Series date is Stela 7, dedicated in A.D. 810. Stela 3 is a curious monument that seems to contain a backwards portion of a Short Count date, *ajaw 7*. This would date the *k'atun* of its dedication

to the 20-year period after 10.0.0.0.0, or A.D. 831. The stela is not in canonical Late Classic form (or even in normal northern Maya Short Count form), which suggests that it is a post-collapse monument. In fact, the carving on Stela 3 may have been added to an already existing blank stela. In sum, with the exception of Stela 3, all the carved monuments of Nim Li Punit were erected during a 76-year span from A.D. 734 to 810.

Wanyerka (2003) has analyzed the epigraphic content of the monuments. Based primarily on texts on Stelae 2, 15, and 21, Wanyerka posits a complex political relationship between Nim Li Punit and Copan/Quirigua. Specifically, there are three references to *ek' xukpi* lords and the phrase *ox witik* appears once on these monuments. Although his interpretation is plausible, it is far from the only one. It is true that the leaf nosed bat in the main sign of Copan is read as *xukpi*. But we know of no references at Copan to "Black Xukpi'" lords. In contrast, references to "Black Xukpi'" lords are known from Quirigua stelae erected after the defeat of the 13th ruler of Copan by *K'ak' Tiliw* in A.D. 738. The three references to *ek' xukpi* in the Nim Li Punit corpus, therefore, probably do not refer to Copan but might refer to Quirigua. Nonetheless, it is also possible that this enigmatic title was used at more than one site.

The appearance of the phrase *ox witik*, which means 'three roots,' on Nim Li Punit Stela 21 may be a reference to something other than the toponym used at Copan. To begin with, the appearance of the phrase immediately after the verb 'its scattering' does not suggest that it is meant to be the place of the event or, indeed, any sort of indirect object. *Ox witik* could be part of the long name and title that follows (it is actually joined with *k'awiil* in the same glyph block) and form with it an intransitive phrase. That is, *ox witik* could be the beginning of the name or title of a ruler of Nim Li Punit. Alternatively, it could be the direct object of the transitive sentence: "the three roots were scattered by *K'awiil Mo'... k'ul ajaw* of Nim Li Punit." Finally, as suggested by David Stuart, *ox witik* could refer to some aspect of the god *K'awiil*, and an item involved with the scattering event, perhaps even the substance, could have been called *ox witik k'awiil*.

Having relied at first on speculative interpretations of the hieroglyphic corpus of Pusilhá (see Braswell et al. 2004), and having learned from further epigraphic research (Prager 2002) and archaeological investigation that there is very limited evidence of connections between Copan and that site, Braswell warns that interpretation of the Nim Li Punit stelae should be more cautious. It is important to remember that the Nim Li Punit stelae that may contain oblique references to Copan or Quirigua never — not even once — show the full emblem glyphs or name persons known from those sites. It is also important to remember that these monuments date to the period of A.D. 734 to A.D. 790, that is, during or after the decline of Copan as a regional power. The death of *Waxaklajuun U'baah K'awiil*, an important turning point in the history of Copan, was A.D. 738. This is just four years after what is probably the latest date mentioned on Nim Li Punit Stela 15 (which twice employs the *ek' xukpi* title), it is the same year as the latest date on Stela 2 (which also mentions an *ek' xukpi* lord), and is some 52 years before Stela 21 was erected. It would be much more reasonable to expect that Copan exerted distant political influence during the two hundred years before any of these monuments were erected than in the waning years of a declining dynasty. It is much more likely that references to *ek xukpi'* at Nim Li Punitrefer to Quirigua, and not Copan. Nevertheless, it is not known if this title was used exclusively by the lords of Quirigua. That is, the hypothesis that the texts of Nim Li Punit directly reference individuals from Quirigua is still unproven.

Beyond the 76-year span of its Late to Terminal Classic monuments, we know very little about the occupational history of Nim Li Punit. Until ceramics are formally analyzed, we will not know when the site was first settled, when it was abandoned, or what sort of economic ties Nim Li Punit had with other sites within or beyond the Southern Belize Region. Not even the hieroglyphic monuments of Nim Li Punit shed much light on political relations with its neighbors. Pusilha does not even once mention Nim Li Punit in its lengthy inscriptions, nor does Nim Li Punit mention Pusilha. Finally,

Uxbenka, as far as we know, mentions neither of the two sites.

Lubaantun

From an archaeological perspective, Lubaantun is by far the best-known site in the Southern Belize Region. Notable excavators at the site include Gann (1929), R. E. Merwin, Thomas A. Joyce (1926; Joyce et al. 1929), Thompson (1928), Hammond (1975), and members of the more recent MASDP project. As already mentioned, the only hieroglyphic texts are found on three undated ballcourt markers. The most important chronological work was conducted by Hammond (1975), who defined occupation of Lubaantun as dating to at least the period of A.D. 770-850, and perhaps as early as A.D. 700 to as late as A.D. 890. In ceramic terms, he viewed Lubaantun as a Tepeu II to Tepeu III site, and cautioned that he was not sure how early in Tepeu II times the site was first occupied.

At the time of Hammond's work at Lubaantun, Nim Li Punit and Uxbenka had not yet been discovered. But his careful consideration of chronology addressed the possibility of temporal overlap with Pusilhá. It was a question he was then unable to answer, but we now can. The latest inscriptions at Pusilhá probably date to A.D. 798, well within even his narrowest chronology for Lubaantun. Moreover, like Lubaantun, Pusilhá has both Tepeu II and Tepeu III ceramics. Occupation of the two sites overlapped during at least the last quarter of the 8th century and the first half of the 9th century, and perhaps even for all of the occupational span of Lubaantun.

The ceramic report for Lubaantun still remains the best and most complete published source for southern Belize. It describes local types such as Puluacax Unslipped (also found at Pusilhá) and Turneffe Unslipped. Also present are Belize Red from the Belize Valley and what Hammond (1975) identifies as Altar Group Fine Orange ware. We wonder if, like most of the Fine Orange sherds from Pusilhá, many of these are imitations of Altar. But most ceramics from Lubaantun belong to the Tepeu ceramic sphere, and forms and decorative modes from the southern Peten are most common. Hammond does not describe any *comales*, so there are also important differences between the ceramic complexes of Pusilhá and Lubaantun.

Chronology

Thanks to recent archaeological work at Uxbenka and Pusilhá, and also to Wanyerka's (2003) analysis of the inscriptions of Uxbenka and Nim Li Punit, we now have a better—albeit still incomplete—understanding of the chronology of the Southern Belize Region.

Uxbenka was the earliest major site in the region to be settled. For the entire Early Classic period, Uxbenka was the largest settlement in inland Toledo District. The smaller settlement of Ek Xux also flourished in the Maya Mountains at this time. During the late 4th century, there were real but poorly understood connections between Uxbenka and Tikal. We now understand that Uxbenka remained an important community and erected carved and dated monuments describing the actions of its rulers until at least A.D. 780, overlapping in time with both Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun.

In the late 6th century, at the dawn of the Late Classic period, Pusilha was settled, probably by immigrants from the southern—and perhaps even southwestern—Peten. We have speculated that push factors that may have led to their migration included the beginning of the endemic warfare characteristic of the southwestern Peten (Braswell et al. 2005a, 2005b). Pull factors for migration could have included plentiful agricultural land and control of an important east-west, riverine trade route linking the Caribbean to the Rio Pasion and Usumacinta. This would have made Pusilhá a competitor of the smaller site of Uxbenka, which had exploited an alternative east-west transportation corridor. During the early to mid-7th century, Pusilha had evanescent, weak, and poorly understood ties with Maya and non-Maya polities in western Honduras. By the late 7th century, however, evidence for these connections disappears entirely from the archaeological and epigraphic record.

Major occupation of Pusilhá, as documented by ceramics, continued well into the Terminal Classic period. This is demonstrated first by the appearance of Belize Red after about A.D. 780, and some 50 years later by the presence of imitation Fine Orange ware. But the

hieroglyphic corpus becomes spotty after A.D. 751 and mute after A.D. 798.

Without ceramic studies, it is difficult to know when Nim Li Punit was first occupied and when it was ultimately abandoned. But we know that the *ajawob* of that site erected monuments during the period A.D. 734 to 810, and that at least one more post-collapse monument was carved even later. During this brief period of monumental activity, which corresponds with the florescence of Quirigua, the rulers of Nim Li Punit may have had ties with lords from that polity.

Lubaantun lacks dated monuments, but the ceramic chronology of the site contains Tepeu II types well documented at both Uxbenka and Pusilhá, and Tepeu III types known from Pusilhá and perhaps also Uxbenka.

Radiocarbon and ceramic data from the Maya Mountains sites suggest that Ek Xux went into decline after A.D. 700. During the Late and Terminal Classic, Muklebal Tzul grew to be the largest site in that region.

Cobbling together all the chronological information, what is now quite clear from ceramics and epigraphic texts is that many of the major sites of the Southern Belize Region — Pusilhá, Uxbenka, Lubaantun, Xnaheb, Nim Li Punit and Muklebal Tzul—flourished during the 8th century A.D. An apparent break in monument erection at Pusilhá might be construed as indicating that the beginning of political decline at that site occurred shortly after A.D. 750, and it is quite possible that this was before the dramatic growth of Lubaantun, which probably took place near the end of the 8th century. Nonetheless, there is considerable temporal overlap of all the major sites in the Southern Belize Region.

Conclusions

What does all this tell us about political and economic integration in southern Belize? Except for the Early Classic, when Uxbenka was the only sizeable polity in the region, there were multiple sites that raised hieroglyphic monuments. At least three of the sites — Uxbenka, Pusilhá, and Nim li Punit — had emblem glyphs, suggesting at least nominal independence of their rulers. Curiously, not one of the three sites with stelae — and there are more than sixty stelae among these centers — contains a clear mention of another site in the region. We have no hieroglyphic references to events at one of the four sites overseen by another, we have no record of royal marriage and female hypogamy, we have no record even of one of the major sites attacking and defeating another. Victories and defeats are recorded, but these seem to refer to other unknown and smaller centers, perhaps in Guatemala.

The four major sites in the foothills of the Southern Belize Region are all relatively close to each other and their populations were quite small. Pusilhá was the largest city, with a population perhaps as great as 6,000 or 7,000 individuals. The density of structures at Lubaantun is less than half that of Pusilhá, and the settlement area also is considerably smaller. The population of Lubaantun was certainly no more than about 3,000, and perhaps much less (see Hammond 1975). Nim Li Punit and Uxbenka were considerably smaller places. Given the very low total population of the Southern Belize Region, resources would have been abundant, and arguments of scarcity as a factor leading to political expansion and incorporation seem unwarranted.

At present, the most likely political scenario for the Southern Belize Region is that during the 8th century, the major sites coexisted as small regional polities of the sort Joyce Marcus (1993) calls provinces and that Juan Pedro Laporte (1996) — who works just across the border from us in Guatemala — calls "unidades politicas segmentarias." Although he uses the word "segmentary," Laporte is careful not to enter the segmentary state debate. What he means is that very small territories, each probably only 500 to 1000 km^2 in area, were dominated by political centers ruled by *ajawob*. Through processes like fissioning or emulation, these *ajawob* maintained most or all the trappings of much more powerful rulers of sites like Naranjo, Tikal, and Copan. Nonetheless, they never could muster the manpower or force to incorporate, subjugate, or even hegemonically dominate their neighbors. For such politically weak *ajawob*, who could not project power at a distance, the carving of stelae and construction of elaborate acropoli (such as we see at Pusilhá and Lubaantun) might have held particular

importance as two of the few ways to express their status.

To speculate, the ancient polities of the Southern Belize Region seem to share much in common with many modern Maya villages across the southern lowlands. They were fiercely independent small polities, each with a strong local identity. The local polities may have had political, economic, or even historical ties with larger centers located outside of the Southern Belize Region, and perhaps tried to manipulate these ties to their own advantage. At present, however, we see relatively little evidence that the small and rather simply organized secondary states that characterize the Southern Belize Region were dominated by external powers in any meaningful way. We have even less data suggesting that the four polities were ever unified within a single cohesive unit. Perhaps this is a lesson that would help the modern nation state of Belize better understand the Q'eqchi' and Mopan villages of western Toledo District.

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